

## The Greek Language in Diaspora: Perceptions Across Three Generations of Greek Australia Woman

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*This paper will discuss the experience of language in diaspora – particularly it will elucidate the perception (both visual and verbal) across three generations of Greek Australian woman living in the diaspora community of Melbourne, Australia. Discussion will focus on the lived experience of three generations of woman who were interviewed in either Greek or English by an experienced qualitative researcher who held both an insider and outsider position within this community. The aim was to consider the issue of language maintenance and its significance. Findings show that, despite the decades that have passed since migration, identity loss has not occurred among this sample of Greek people in Melbourne. Common phenomena, such as translanguaging and the nature of bilingualism in this population, are also considered. This emphasizes the importance of language maintenance in this community and its significance in the identity perceptions of its members.*

**Keywords:** *heritage language, Greek, language maintenance, diaspora*

### Introduction and Background

This paper presents data and findings from a qualitative study using an ethnographic method that considered the health beliefs and practices in three generations of Greek Australian women in Melbourne. Maintenance of a Greek way of life and the associated customs in diaspora is not a new phenomenon. Greek culture in Australia dates from when the first Greek people began arriving in Australia many decades ago. For the descendants of these immigrants, maintaining their Hellenic heritage has been seen as both vital and important. The aim of the research presented here was to explore transmission of health information among three generations of Greek Australian women in a format that allowed the 48 participants to share the meaning they give to life experiences associated with health, illness and overall wellbeing. The data collected were analysed using principles of thematic analysis and semiotics. Despite the fact that the original study was focused on health beliefs and practices, it collected a large amount of linguistic data, in the form of both examples (language used by participants in discussing other topics) and references to the role of the Greek language directly. It is this subset of linguistic data that is discussed in this paper.

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## **Review of Literature**

In the context of migration, maintenance of a heritage language has been seen to support cultural and social cohesion, specifically in the Australian context (Clyne 2008, MacLeod et al. 2016). However, mastery of the majority language is important and is closely linked to educational success which leads directly to employment and socioeconomic status (Blake et al. 2018). Conversely, loss of the heritage language has been associated with lower academic attainment and social problems in migrant communities affecting individuals, families and the community as a whole (Bankston and Zhou 1995). For younger individuals, difficulty in school and in obtaining employment may be most significant, but the heritage language is often the medium by which cultural practices and traditional values are transmitted between generations; and language maintenance supports wellbeing, self-perception, and identity (Wong Fillmore 1991). Identity has been shown to be a significant factor in family cohesion in immigrant communities (Ho and Birman 2010). Maintenance of the heritage language among younger generations who were born in diaspora allow for the intergenerational connection with older relatives who may only speak the heritage language (Park and Sarkar 2007). There are numerous social and cultural factors that can affect language maintenance as well as language loss (Karidakis and Arunachalam 2016). For English speaking cultures like Australia, however, the number of generations since migration seems to be significant, and research has shown that shift in language dominance tends to occur within three generations (Willoughby 2018).

For members of a diaspora community, culture often reflects aspects of the culture of origin as well as elements drawn from the society in which they are living. Their “diaspora identity” then depends on the settlement process and the extent to which the culture of origin, its norms, traditions and way of life, can be maintained in the new location (Colson 2003). In this, memories of the past and traditional conceptualizations, usually provided by older relatives, supplement new practices and ways of life particularly for younger individuals. For them, continued participation in the social and cultural networks associated with their heritage may be of greater significance and particular importance in establishing and maintaining specific narratives based on collective memory of significant events or experiences (Giorgas 2000a, Giorgas 2000b). The maintenance of heritage culture depends on the ability to use the heritage language. However, the degree to which this can be achieved varies with the motivation and circumstances of speakers as well as the demands on migrants to acculturate and use the majority language.

## **Methodology**

The research presented here was carried out using a qualitative method with the overall aim being to understand and elucidate the way in which the participants understood their own experiences, culture, and their perceptions of being of Greek background in Australia. An ethnographic approach was applied that included the collection of data via in-depth interviews that was a way give a voice to the

participants who represented three generations. The youngest generation was interviewed first, followed by their mothers' generation with members of the immigrant generation (grandmothers) last. The reason for this was an assumption that ideas about Greek health, wellbeing and culture derived in large part from the immigrant generation who had firsthand experience of life in Greece. Efforts were made to ensure that as much as possible that the information, stories and historical knowledge provided represented the original thoughts and beliefs of each set of participants.

Below please refer to the interview schedule applied when interviewing the participants.

### General Questions for all Participants

1. *What does it mean to be healthy? (We want to know what you think "healthy" means).*
2. *How can you tell if someone is healthy or sick? Are there observational signs?*
3. *What foods are most healthy? How do you know?*
4. *What foods are unhealthy? How do you know?*
5. *Can we improve/protect our health by eating certain things? (fasting)*
6. *Does God make people sick? Why?*
7. *Are religious people more likely to be healthy? Why?*
8. *Is being sick a punishment from God? For what?*
9. *Are there religious teachings about disease and health?*
10. *How is illness treated in your family? Are there any specific remedies used in your family?*
11. *Are there diseases that cannot be treated by doctors? What examples?*
12. *How do you treat illnesses in your family without going to the doctor?*
13. *Are there diseases or illnesses that are specific to Greek people?*
14. *What do you think about magic?*
15. *What do you do to stay healthy?*
16. *Are there things in your environment that you think are unhealthy? What are some examples?*

### Specific Questions for Grandmothers (Migrant Generation)

1. *How was illness treated in Greece when you were a child?*
2. *When you were sick as a child did you go to the doctor?*
3. *How was illness treated in Greece by your parents?*
4. *What are some folk remedies that you may remember from your mother (fever, cuts or specific remedies).*
5. *Have you used or are you aware of any medical plants to treat illness?*
6. *Was illness treated differently in Greece than in Australia?*
7. *Did you eat different food when you lived in Greece?*
8. *What have you tried to maintain and hand down to the younger generations about the Greek way of life?*

9. *What do you remember about your first few years in Australia?*
10. *Did migrating to Australia impact your health?*
11. *How many years after migrating to Australia did you return to Greece?*
12. *How often do you visit Greece? And why?*
13. *Have you been to Greece with your children? And/or your grandchildren?*
14. *Is the way of life different in Greece to Australia? How? Why?*
15. *Have any of your health lifestyle habit's changed since migrating and what may have influenced these changes?*
16. *Are you a member of any Greek groups and/or clubs?*

#### Specific Questions for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation

1. *What has you mother and or/grandmother told you about how illness was treated in Greece?*
2. *Do you know if your mother/and or grandmother went to doctors as a child in Greece?*
3. *Do you know how illness is treated in Greece?*
4. *What has your mother and/or grandmother told you about her first few years in Australia?*
5. *Do you think migrating to Australia has impacted her health?*
6. *Have you been to Greece? If yes, how old were you and with whom did you go? What do you remember about Greece is it similar to what your mother or grandmother has told you? If no, why? Would you like to visit Greece? If yes would you like to go to Greece again?*
7. *What do you know about the way of life in Greece- is it different to the Greek way of life in Australia? Do you know of any Greek remedies (health beliefs) and from whom? Do you use them and trust them? Have you taught your mother and or grandmother any non-Greek remedies? If yes do they use them?*
8. *Do you have many Greek friends?*
9. *Have you shared your Greek culture (customs, traditions, health beliefs) with any of your non Greek friends?*
10. *Are you a member of any Greek clubs or groups? Why? If yes have these groups provided you with a link to your Greek heritage*
11. *What has your experience been as a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Australia? School and what they may have learnt from their mother or grandmother about the Greek culture (language, food, cooking)*
12. *Did you go to Greek school? Why? Did you like it?*
13. *Is it important for you to maintain the Greek way of life? Why? How? Would this be or has it been challenging?*

The first author of this paper is a member of this same Greek diaspora community and was in a position to conduct the interviews in the preferred language of participants.

Sixteen families from the Greek community in Melbourne took part in this research making a total of 48 female participants. Table 1 outlines participant demographics.

**Table 1.** *Participant Demographics*

	<b>Immigrant generation</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> generation</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> generation</b>
Age [at the time of interview]	58-78	37-50	16-18
Years in Australia	39-56	Australian born	Australian born

A total of 48 women from 16 families who took part in this study and were interviewed over a six-month period. Recruitment occurred via several channels such as through the Greek Orthodox schools of Melbourne, the Greek Orthodox churches of Melbourne and various Greek specific cultural groups.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to explore the transmission of health beliefs – that included participants’ understanding of health and the nature of health and illness. Ethics approval for this project was obtained from the Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG) of the Faculty of Arts and Education of Deakin University

All interviews were audio recorded by permission and then transcribed. These transcripts were used as the material for analysis which was carried out using principles of both thematic analysis and semiotics that allowed for the identification of themes. A selection of findings relating to language use are discussed below.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings of this study indicated that language maintenance was important to all three generations of Greek Australian women, whether or not they spoken Greek fluently. They all felt language was intimately connected to culture and that Greek culture was of great personal as well as general value. They tended to be proud of their heritage and of the achievements of the Greek people, of which they saw themselves as a part. It was notable that this sentiment was expressed by members of all three generations, whether or not they had an firsthand experience of Greece.

All three generations used both Greek and English, but in different ways. The oldest generation, the grandmothers, were all first language speakers of Greek. Many spoke only very limited English and tended to use Greek with their families and friends. However, even among these speakers, evidence of English encroachment was seen, with many having adopted the English word for common items which they used as loan words in discourse that was otherwise fully in Greek. Many of these individuals expressed a strong desire for their children and especially grandchildren to continue to use the Greek language. However, they did accept that English was necessary for these younger family members to succeed in Australia. Some of the women in the immigrant generation expressed their views as follows:

*“I speak to my children and grandchildren in Greek. The younger one doesn’t always understand me and, by accident, I sometimes speak to them in English, and that’s wrong. And they then answer in Greek. I love that, too.”*

*“There are times by accident that I speak in English as I have forgotten the Greek word. This also happened to me in Greece. I don’t know how this happens.”*

Tables 2 and 3 include some language use examples by all generations.

**Table 2.** *Examples of English Words Used by the Immigrant Generation*

Homemade	Anyway	alcohol
Jeans	Lungs	hamburger
Chips	Restaurant	stress
Healthy	Computer	mobile
bus stop	Drugs	cheese cake
ice cream	Government	happy
Cancer	Pollution	infection
no hope	very difficult	take it easy

**Table 3.** *Use of Some Greek Words by 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Participants*

<b>1<sup>st</sup> generation</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> generation</b>
μάτι (evil eye)	κήπος (garden)
Ευκελεο (Holy Unction)	Νιστια (fasting)
Γιαγιά (grandmother)	σέλινο (celery)
χαμομήλι (chamomile tea)	Ευκελεο (Holy Unction)
Αγιασμός (Holy water)	Σταυρός (cross)
χωρίο (village)	χωρίο (village)
Προσευχή (Prayer)	Πάτερ ημων (Lord’s Prayer)
πρόσφορο (offering bread)	Μοναστήρι (monastery)
Παναγία (Virgin Mary)	Πρόσφορο (offering bread)
ρίγανη (Oregano)	χαμομήλι (chamomile tea)
Μύρο (Myrrh)	Γιαγια (grandmother)

The mothers in the study, who had been born in Australia but were raised by Greek speaking parents, tended to be true bilinguals who were able to use either Greek or English in any setting or context they experienced. They had often acted as unofficial interpreters for their parents and routinely engaged in code switching between languages, depending on the circumstances and speakers involved. While the women of this generation were fluent Greek speakers, the way they used the language was highly affected by the Australian context where they had grown up, with Greek terms and expressions mirroring their parents’ usage and being adapted by their own experience. Many of them hoped their children might also speak Greek but did not feel it to be the pressing issue their parents did. They tended to send their children to Greek school (a supplementary program for language maintenance), and some tried to use the language with children. However, the women of this generation had a personal understanding of the Australian context and the need for their

children to be full and natural speakers of Australian English. Nonetheless, they had sentimental feelings for the Greek language. One said:

*“I use all the Greek herbs in my cooking like ρίγανη [oregano]. I can say the word ‘oregano’ [but] when I say ρίγανη, the word [English word] just gets stuck.”*

The youngest participants in the study were all English speakers first. Their use of the language did not differ from other Australian young people, and they were not fluent in Greek. Some routinely used various terms as loan words in English, particularly when speaking to their parents or grandparents, while others were primarily English speakers. Many of these younger women were of the opinion that Greek was important and viewed the language as a sign of identity that could be used to support exclusivity among speakers from a similar background. All were proud to be of Greek heritage, and several wished to master the language to a higher level. The participants expressed this as follows:

*“Sometimes I’m talking to one of my Aussie friends and I’m trying to explain something to them and I get caught because I can’t think of the word in English and another funny thing that occurs when we have a secret or don’t want a non Greek to understand us we speak in Greek -its funny to hear but does happen, often too.”*

*“[I have] definitely more Greek friends. Some have been family friends, and then you’re friends with them as well. At school as well, everyone flocked together. We kind of stuck with each other, because we are more like minded, we understand each other, and we can use the Greek slang in conversation. I think it would be familiarity because we have common grounds.”*

Language shift is evident among these members of the Greek community in Melbourne, but there is also evidence that heritage culture is being translated from Greek into English as the dominant language of the population shifts. This is giving rise to instances of translanguaging among younger speakers, where some speakers seem to possess a single integrated repertoire of language that is largely English but with Greek elements replacing English terms in key domains, such as religion, cooking, and family relationships. Increasingly, Greek is becoming a foreign language that requires formal study for these younger speakers because the community no longer supports natural acquisition of the language. The bilingual first generation is highly integrated into the Australian mainstream, and the inevitable cultural influences from other groups and especially English speakers has impacted the transmission of the language. Some of the members of this generation are married to non-Greek individuals, making the common language of the home English. For the youngest generation, language use in school and among peers tends to dominate, especially as their parents also speak English.

## Conclusion

Despite this, there seems to be little loss of cultural import among the youngest members of the community. Many of them stated that they intend to pass a Greek identity on to their own children and participate themselves in Greek cultural forums, either in person or online. Therefore, it would not be surprising if the Greek cultural institutions that were founded by the immigrant generation and supported by the first Australian generation continue into the future as cultural forums for people who are English speakers of Greek background.

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